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## THE HEALTH OF WOMEN WORKERS<sup>1</sup>

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**I** SHALL not attempt to speak to you of statistics that have been compiled, or to give you theories of economics; you know far more of such things than I do: but I shall talk along the line of my experience in my own work, endeavoring to make a few suggestions that have occurred to me.

Welfare work, as I see it, consists in the conservation of human energy; and that human energy is to be conserved by means of education—physical education, which will train and develop physically; mental education, which will stimulate and encourage; moral education, which will reprove and inspire; and social education, which will make workers helpful both to themselves and to one another. These result: first, in establishing as high a degree of efficiency as is possible with the individual workman; second, in creating an atmosphere which is a material aid to such efficiency. That I conceive to be the duty of the welfare worker. The means of attaining ends so greatly to be desired, the directing of energy into channels that will produce significant results, the applying of force where it will tell, the transformation of latent power into action,—this work is to be accomplished, I say, by means of education.

When I took charge of my present work in Brooklyn some five or six years ago, a lunch room had already been established. There are lunch rooms and lunch rooms. A lunch room may be a place to eat, and only that; it may have nothing about it of welfare work. The proper enjoyment of eating depends on what people eat, where they eat, and the attitude or atmosphere in which they sit down to their meals. If you sit down to a table where the roaches are swarming, and where there is dust and dirt, with a garbage can at either end, you are neither going

<sup>1</sup> Read in discussion at the meeting of the Academy of Political Science, November 11, 1911.

to enjoy your meal, nor are you going to be best fitted for the work you have to do: if you sit down in such a place your digestion is going to suffer, your stomach is going to be out of order, and everything is going wrong. The majority of our ills come from the stomach. It is an important thing, this providing people with luncheon. I would rather get up a six-course dinner every day in the month than to have to provide one luncheon to be carried every day: because you never have the sorts of things in the house that the person will eat: and if you go to restaurants to buy lunch, under the prevailing conditions, prevailing high prices, you cannot get enough to eat for ten or fifteen cents, and the wages received by the girls of whom I am speaking are such that they generally cannot spend over eight to ten cents a meal: consequently a lunch room, where suitable and wholesome food can be given in a clean place and a pleasant atmosphere, is a prime necessity. Also in conducting a lunch room one finds that many people want to eat what you think they should not eat. They want cake, and you cannot give them cake at every meal simply because they want it. It fills up, but is not very nutritious—I will not say it has no nutrition, but it is not rich in nutrition—and people have to be trained to eat what is good for them to eat. I had to adopt rice, both because of its relatively low price and because of its nutritious qualities, and many of the girls did not want rice. I had to train them to eat it, but it took me two years to do it—two years to break up the habit of always eating potatoes.

What a person eats and how he eats it is reflected first in his personal condition and then in the manner in which he does his work. If girls go without breakfast—and I have found that many of them used to go without breakfast—they cannot do their work. Nor can they do their work when a cup of coffee is snatched with one hand while dressing, and a roll is eaten on the way downstairs. They have to be taught how to take care of themselves. The proper management of the lunch room I conceive to be one of the most important things in factories where the employes do not live near enough to go home at the noon hour. Often better lunches are served there than they would get at home.

Second, I found that a good many people needed attention for all the various ills that flesh is heir to: and this led me to the discovery that a seidlitz powder, which seemed to be the universal remedy, was not a cure-all. So I went to a good physician and obtained a set of good prescriptions, prescriptions for simple ailments, headaches and various other aches, and purchased the drugs that would fit those aches and ills. Those things grew little by little: and to-day I have quite a respectable shelf of medicines, which have been prescribed for such ills by different reliable physicians, and I am able to diagnose and prescribe for various minor ailments. I am going to give you a few figures I have collected from such prescribing.

Since August, 1908, a record has been kept of every patient who has applied for medical aid. This record includes the names of patients, with the ailment in each case and the remedy applied, so that I have a set of statistics running back over three years.

RECORDED CASES FROM AUGUST, 1908 TO AUGUST, 1911

Stomach . . . . .	436	Rheumatism . . . . .	31
Headache . . . . .	340	No breakfast . . . . .	25
Menses. . . . .	328	Malaria . . . . .	16
Colds . . . . .	124	Eyes . . . . .	16
Toothache . . . . .	118	Nosebleed . . . . .	9
Fainting and weakness . . . . .	89	Hemorrhoids . . . . .	4
Burns . . . . .	79	Miscellaneous . . . . .	124
Sore throat . . . . .	55		
Nerves . . . . .	49	Total . . . . .	1876
Neuralgia . . . . .	36		

In those three years I have had an average of between one hundred and sixty-five and one hundred and seventy women under my supervision—the men do not come so closely under my attention, as they are mostly employed in outside work—but I have had between a hundred and seventy and a hundred and eighty-five people under my care, and during those three years we have supplied one thousand eight hundred and seventy-nine prescriptions. Does not that record show the need of such prescriptions to keep those girls and women in physical health?

As the table shows, the stomach is the root of a great deal of

evil—I will not say all—heading the list with 436 cases in which it was the direct cause of the trouble. At the other end of the list is nosebleed, 9 cases, while of burns, which are generally supposed to be the most common trouble in laundries, there are 79, of which only six were severe enough to be recorded.

These 1879 cases make me consider that it would be worth while for the small manufacturer, employing two, three or four hundred women, to have some one to look after their physical health. Those 1879 cases speak for themselves. They were necessary treatments; people do not take castor oil, Epsom salts, or bitter powders for the pleasure of the taste or the odor; they take them in order to get better; and it is much to be able to help them.

Again, there is the economic feature of such work. Every employer of labor, whether in factory, store, shop or business office, has a business that is measured by the efficiency of his subordinates. One of the factors of the efficiency of these employes is the time spent in performing their duties. If one girl has to go home from a work-room, another girl will have to do her work, and not only may not be able to do it so well, but must perform it in addition to her own duties. Most employers keep just about as many people as they need to do the work that is required; the fact that some keep more than they need, while some employ less, is beside the question. Someone has to do the work of the person who is away; and there is an economic loss to the manufacturer, where the work of one employe has for any reason to be done by other employes, and there is certainly an economic loss to the employe that goes home. Furthermore, when she goes home, the general remedy is simply to go to bed; and it does not always accomplish the results desired. It is usual to hear girls say, when they have had to leave the plant on account of indisposition, and are asked what they did, "I just went to bed; I thought I'd be better in the morning." If there were a woman on hand who could and would give them what they needed, and let them rest for fifteen minutes or an hour or two in the rest-room, they could often go back to their work invigorated, and every one would be better for their being there.

Sometimes people become a little hysterical, because they have been taken to task by the forewoman, for example, and sometimes a girl faints in her place, and where that happens, all the others are excited and upset, and it is some minutes before they can return to their work. If there is a room where such girls can be cared for, time is saved. It would be well worth while for any employer of labor to take care of the physical health of his employes in that way. When I think of my one hundred and seventy girls with an average of over 600 cases a year, and then think of the vast office buildings many stories high, where the girls pour out every night, many hundreds of them, I think one of the most important things would be to have in each of these great buildings of New York, a room or rooms, with a social superintendent or welfare manager in charge, a woman with personality strong enough to inspire confidence, and with sympathy deep and broad enough to give help in the smallest matter, or animate with courage for the large undertaking, with imagination and education sufficient for her to give all that was possible of physical, mental and spiritual help and inspiration to the girls.

Sometimes the mere talking to a person of that kind is a help. One of our girls said the other day, "I just felt as if I couldn't do anything, I was so nervous when I came in here, but it seems to have gone away." And it had; she had "talked it off." More or less trouble of this sort is inevitable. Little acts of carelessness will creep in, and when the forewoman comes in and says, "This is wrong," or "That is out of the way," nervousness results. Unless some one can be there to start a new train of thought, or turn the "flat," as a correction is called, into an uplift, it may be brooded over until a very acute case of self-pity is developed, than which disease there are few worse. "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver," and often that word will put a girl in a condition to do her work better than she had been doing it before, because it changes the atmosphere.

One more point. In the last five years we have not had many girls married out,—and I am a matchmaker, too, and want them to marry when they can do well. They do not all marry; but

I have watched carefully those that did, and I have found that when they marry they undergo maternity very much the same as do those who have not worked in factories—and this in cases where they have worked from four to seven years with us in the laundry.

The office girl I wish particularly to speak of. She needs guidance. Her life is in a way unnatural, and she is quite as susceptible to illness as her more active sister in the factory, if not more so. That is an additional reason for the suggestion I made in regard to the help that is needed to conserve the energies of girls in offices.

You have asked me to speak only of the physical side, the health of women workers. I have kept to my text, and would close with saying that we all need work; we want it; it is our common heritage, our common joy; but we must keep ourselves and those for whom we are responsible in good physical health if we would have the work done well, and be happy in the doing of it.